Glimpses

I don't know about you, but I go a little crazy this time of year. So when for what seemed the tenth time that morning the logger of my family bemoaned the fate of the "poor robins", I lost it. "Robins! What about me?!?" I snapped at him. Mudded out of the woods, despite the opportunity to sleep in, he had arisen early with me to make the morning fires and start the coffee. Moral support, he calls it. The unusually warm weather we had been enjoying had left us with a return to winter snow, and the rumors we had heard of 2 spring robins hanging around Talmoon turned out to be true. They're now parked in the crab tree in the yard, trying to make a living off of last year's apples. Sure, they're suffering, but so are the rest of us as we sink back down into our winter funk.

Wasn't it just last week that we took the first of our spring picnics to celebrate the returning waterfowl? Did I not sit on a bench in that favorite of early spring spots, close to the growing water, in order that I might watch the trumpeter swans and Canada geese? I'm pretty sure that was a light jacket and tennis shoes that I was wearing, because the ground was brown, not white. I'm thinking it was nearly 60 degrees, and the hole in the ice was yet rather small, which sets up an interesting situation in which the most dominant gander wages a more-or-less running battle with anyone who doesn't yield their ground. We were amazed at the force involved as what must be the meanest guy flew smack into another goose. What exactly it accomplishes to assert territoriality over a continually changing landscape of icy water is sort of a puzzle to me. But at any rate, even the cockiest gander is quickly put in his place by the much larger swans, should he happen to linger in the wrong location. A firm bite on the butt is all it takes to remind that goose that he really isn't the top dog, after all.

Yet missing from this scene are Libby's pelicans. On the Chippewa National Forest they arrive a little behind the swans, geese, and ducks. But I know they'll come, because they always do. The pelicans' spring arrival is relatively reliable, but because spring break-up is variable in its timing, some years they arrive to a landscape of shoreline snow and plenty of ice. On a year like that, my daughter Libby enjoyed sneaking in with her camera to where the pelicans rested on an icy shore. Other years the living is easier with

plenty of open water to pick from. Often I'll see them first on the rivers, because the lakes will lag behind.

These days it seems like there's plenty of pelicans around to watch, but did you know that was not always so? The American White Pelican was persecuted to the point of being wiped out as a nesting species in Minnesota by 1878. People were convinced that this large fish-eating bird must be competing with their interests by eating sport fish.

From then until the mid-1900s, pelicans migrated through Minnesota on the way to their breeding grounds in Canada and a large colony in North Dakota. A few summered in Minnesota at various locations, including Leech Lake. In the 1960s, a white pelican nest was found in southwestern Minnesota at a place that eventually became a substantial colony. Since then, a few other colonies have appeared in Minnesota, which likely brings more resilience to the Minnesota population. Pelicans are vulnerable due to their colonial breeding habits and the fact that they occupy a small number of breeding locations. As of 2012, over 22,000 pairs of pelicans were nesting in Minnesota, and large numbers of non-breeding adults are also seen regularly on Minnesota lakes during the summertime. This recolonization of former pelican range happened in what has been described as a slow and improbable fashion, with no real assistance in the form of recovery plans or reintroductions from other areas.

You will recognize flocks of pelicans in the air by their white bodies and black wing-tips, and by their graceful formations. They flap slowly, and soar upwards and round and round on thermals.

On the ground, pelicans are far less graceful; they teeter side to side as they walk. They nest on islands in colonies of birds. The nest is a shallow depression in the ground, lined with gravel or plants. Two eggs are laid, but generally only the older chick will survive. Within about 1 ½ days of hatching, pelican chicks squawk within the shell, which causes the adult to brood that egg more closely. The younger egg tends to get neglected. Once hatched, the older chick tends to harass the younger, and get most of the food. After leaving the nest about 40% of fledged pelican chicks die in their first year, but once pelicans attain breeding age of about 3 years, they might live 10 - 20 years or more. Pelican chicks move off the nest at about 3 weeks of age, at which time they form a group called a crèche, which keeps them warm and somewhat protected. At this time the adults are mostly away, and return to find their own chick for feeding. Young pelicans can swim at about 3 weeks, and fly at about 2 months old.

Our Minnesota pelicans migrate south through the Mississippi River corridor and the Great Plains to the Gulf of Mexico. Young birds spend their next year in the Gulf and do not come home to Minnesota until their second year. As with Minnesota loons, our pelicans were in the unfortunate position of being exposed to the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the largest oil spill in history in U.S. waters. Both the oil and the oil dispersants used to break up the oil from the ocean surface is hazardous to pelicans. The birds are now being studied to determine long term potential effects of this exposure.

Other hazards to pelicans include habitat degradation, contaminants, and disturbance. Adult pelicans are rarely preyed upon, and eggs and young are rarely taken at undisturbed colonies, unless low water makes them accessible to coyotes. But if a nesting colony is disturbed,

scavenging gulls are the main predator, and can quickly wreak havoc on young chicks. Wetlands that are affected by insecticides, fertilizers, and other agricultural pollutants may not provide safe feeding opportunities.

What do pelicans eat? Their favored foraging sites are shallow marshes, rivers and lake edges. Diet analysis of pelicans reveals that most of their food consists of rough fish like carp, suckers, and bullheads, small pan fish, salamanders, and crayfish. Larger game fish that have been caught and previously injured by anglers may also be taken because they are not so good at escaping. White pelicans feed near the water's surface, dipping their big bills in the water. They do not do the plunge diving that brown pelicans do from the air. While on their breeding ground, pelicans may travel over 30 miles from nesting islands to feeding locations, and they commonly feed at night during the breeding season.

White pelicans will hunt cooperatively, especially when their catch rate is down. They will line up and drive fish into the shallows, where they are easier to catch. From what I have seen, at that point the cooperation goes way down. In fact, you could say it's every man for himself as the pelicans harass and grab each other in an attempt to steal the goods. They seem to be pretty successful at taking someone else's meal. One source said that 30% of larger fish items are lost to somebody else.

Have you ever seen a pelican sitting around on shore fluttering its bill pouch? That's how they cool off when in the hot sun. If you are close to pelicans, you may hear them vocalize. They don't sing, but make more of a grunting noise, especially in antagonistic or colony settings. At our favorite early spring birding spot, I enjoy watching the pelicans scramble with each other for food. Their grunting sounds somewhat like barnyard pigs.

March in the Northwoods often offers us only glimpses of spring, as the changing of the seasons is upon us. On my cranky morning, I looked up as I pulled on my winter boots to head off to work and saw a patient man had brought my car out for easy access. As if in support of the whole effort, my sweet old dog sat nearby – her way of letting a person know she would like to go with. Hang in there.

by Kelly Barrett, Wildlife Biologist
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